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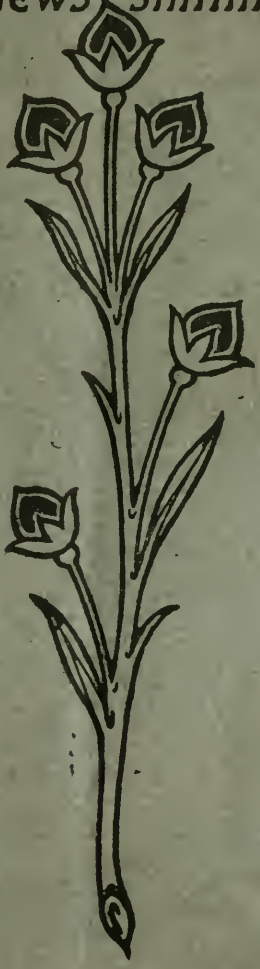

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CHRIST IN HADES

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CHRIST IN HADES

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LONDON
ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO STREET
1897

Fifth Edition

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TO
FRANK BENSON
I DEDICATE
THIS BOOK

CHRIST IN HADES

A PHANTASY

KEEN as a blinded man, at dawn awake,
Smells in the dark the cold odour of earth;
Eastward he turns his eyes, and over him
A dreadful freshness exquisitely breathes;
The room is brightening, even his own face!
So the excluded ghosts in Hades felt
A waft of early sweet, and heard the rain
Of Spring beginning over them; they all
Stood still, and in each other's faces looked.
And restless grew their queen Persephone;
Who, like a child, dreading to be observed
By awful Dis, threw little glances down
Toward them, and understood them with her eyes.
Perpetual dolour had as yet but drooped
The corners of her mouth; and in her hand
She held a bloom that had on earth a name.

Quickly she whispered: "Come, my Hermes, come!
'Tis time to fetch me! Ah, through all my veins
The sharpness of the spring returns: I hear
The stalk revive with sap, and the first drops
On green illumined grass; now over me
The blades are growing fast; I cannot rest.
He comes, he comes! Yet with how slow a step,
Who used to run along a sunny gust!
And O a withered wreath! no roses now
Dewy from paradise. Surely not his
Those earnest eyes, that ragged hair; his face,
Was glad and cold. This is no god at all,
Only some grieving human shade, with hands
Unsightly, and the eager Furies wheel
Over him!" Slowly to her side her arms
Had fallen; Christ with grave eyes looks on her.
Her young mouth trembled fast, and from her hand
With serious face she let the earthly flower
Drop down; then, stretching out her arms, she said:
"O all fresh out of beautiful sunlight!
Thine eyes are still too dazed to see us clear.
Was it not difficult to come away
Straight from the greenness to the dimness? Now
It is the time of tender, opening things.
Above my head the fields murmur and wave,

And breezes are just moving the clear heat.
O the mid-noon is trembling on the corn,
On cattle calm, and trees in perfect sleep.
And hast thou empty come? Hast thou not
brought
Even a blossom with the noise of rain
And smell of earth about it, that we all
Might gather round and whisper over it?
At one wet blossom all the dead would feel!
O thou beginning to glide here a shadow,
Soon shalt thou know how much it seems to us,
In miserable dim magnificence,
To feel the snowdrop growing over us!
That barren crown! but now it was a wreath.
These gusts of Hell have blown it into thorn!
If thou canst bear it yet, O speak to me
Of the blue noon, of breezes and of rivers!"

A wonderful stillness stopped her; like to trees
Motionless in an ecstasy of rain,
So the tall dead stood drooping around Christ,
Under the falling peace intensely still;
And some in slow delight their faces raised
Upwards; but soon, like leaves, duly released,
Tormented phantoms, ancient injured shades,
Sighing began downward to drift and glide
Toward him, and unintelligibly healed
Lingered, with closing eyes and parting lips.
Agamemnon bowed over, and from his wheel
Ixion staggered to his feet all blind.

Over the head of Jesus the whole sky
Of pain began to drive: old punishments
Diswreathing drooped, and legendary dooms
Dispersing hung, and lurid history streamed.
But he against that flying sky remained
Placid with power; in silence stood the dead,
Gazing; only was heard that river steal,
The listless ripple of Oblivion.
Then an Athenian ghost stood out and spoke.
"I fear to speak to thee, while these my eyes
Behold our great life interrupted pause.
That was our sky, that passes: and I miss
The busy sound of water, and of stone;
And sorrows that we thought perpetual
I see suspended, and amid them thee
Gentle, and all injured. Art thou a god
Easily closing all these open eyes,
And hast not spoken word? Thou hast not played
Monotonously as rain, inducing sleep:
Thou comest without lute, yet hast thou power
To charm the fixed melancholy of spirits?
Art thou a god? Then guide us to the air,
To trees and rivers, that peculiar light
Which even now is squandered on the beasts.
Canst thou not make the primrose venture up
Or bring the gentlest shower? O pity us;
For I would ask of thee only to look
Upon the wonderful sunlight, and to smell
Earth in the rain. Is not the labourer,

Returning heavy through the August sheaves
Against the setting sun, who gladly smells
His supper from the opening door, is he
Not happier than these melancholy kings?
How good it is to live, even at the worst!
God was so lavish to us once, but here
He hath repented, jealous of his beams.
Just as a widower, that dreaming holds
His dead wife in his arms, not wondering,
So natural it appears; then starting up
With trivial words, or even with a jest,
Then realises all the uncoloured dawn,
And near his head the young bird in the leaves
Stirring; not less, nor otherwise do we
Want in this colourless country the warm earth.
Yet how shall we in thy tormented face
Believe? Thou comest from the glistening sun
As out of some great battle, nor hast thou
The beautiful ease of the untroubled gods.
Most strong are they, for they are joyous cold.
Thou art not happy! We can trust thee not.
How wilt thou lead with feet already pierced?
And if we ask thy hand, see, it is torn!

But when he had spoken, Christ no answer made.
Upon his hands in uncouth gratitude
Great prisoners muttering fawned: behind them
stood
Dreadful suspended business, and vast life
Pausing, dismantled piers, and naked frames.

And further, shapes from obscure troubles loosed,
Like mist descended: on the horizon last,
The piled tremendous firmament collapsed,
With dazzling pains, and solemn sorrows white.

Then stole a woman up to him, and said:
"Although I know thee not, yet can I tell
That only a great love hath brought thee hither.
Didst thou so ail in brightness, and couldst not rest
For thinking of some woman? Was thy bed
So empty, cold thy hearth, and aimless glides
Thy wife amidst us? Whom then dost thou seek?
For see, we are so changed: thou wouldst not know
The busy form that moved about thy fire.
She has no occupation, and no care,
No little tasks. O we had pleasant homes.
And often we remember husbands dear,
That were most kind, and wonder after them.
My little children! Who sings to them now?
Return then to the earth! Thou canst not fetch
Thy drooping listless woman to the air.
Thou'lt have no comfort out of her at all.
Yet say, perhaps thou hast but lately died,
And wanderest here unburied? Restless seem
Those eyes; ah, on thy body thou dost feel
The bird settling? Hath no friend covered up
Thy limbs, or do they fall with falling waves?"

But one broke in on her with eager words.
"See how we live along exhausted streams,
Eluding forests, and dispersing hills;
O but I gloried and drank and wept and laughed!
Give me again great life! To dare, to enjoy,
To explore, never to tire, to be alive,
And full of blood, and young, to risk, to love!
The bright glory of after-battle wine,
The flushed recounting faces, the stern hum
Of burnished armies, thrill of unknown seas!"
As he was speaking, slowly all the dead
The melancholy attraction of Jesus felt;
And millions, like a sea, wave upon wave,
Heaved dreaming to that moonlight face, or ran
In wonderful long ripples, sorrow-charmed.
Toward him in faded purple, pacing came
Dead emperors, and sad unflattered kings;
Unlucky captains listless armies led;
Poets with music frozen on their lips,
Toward the pale Brilliance sighed; until at last
Antiquity, like evening gathering,
With mild and starry faces, gradually
Had stolen up. Glimmering all the dead
Looked upon Jesus; as they stood, some thought
Spread from the furthest edges like a breeze,
Till like a leafy forest, the huge host
Whispered together, bending all one way
Toward him; and then ensued a stillness deep.
But suddenly the form of Jesus stirred;
And all the dead stirred with him suddenly.

He shuddered in a rapture; and from his eyes
They felt returning agonies of hope.
As men, flame-wrapped, hither and thither run,
To rid them, or fall headlong to the ground;
The dead, caught in intolerable hope,
Hither and hither burning rushed, or fell
Imploring him to leave them cold; but Christ
Came through them: leading irresistibly
Not western spirits alone: but all that world
Was up! and after him in passion swept
Dead Asia, murmuring, and the buried North!

But in his path a lonely spirit stood;
A Roman, he who from a greater Greek
Borrowed as beautifully as the moon
The fire of the sun: fresh come he was, and still
Deaf with the sound of Rome: forward he came
Softly; a human tear had not yet dried.
"Whither," he said, "O whither dost thou lead
In such a calm all these embattled dead?
Almost I could begin to sing again,
To see these nations burning run through Hell,
Magnificently anguished, by the grave
Untired; and this last March against the Powers.
Who would more gladly follow thee than I?
But over me the human trouble comes.
Dear gladiator pitted against Fate,
I fear for thee: around thee is the scent
Of over-beautiful, quick-fading things,
The pang, the gap, the briefness, all the dew,

Tremble, and suddenness of earth: I must
Remember young men dead in their hot bloom,
The sweetness of the world edged like a sword,
The melancholy knocking of those waves,
The deep unhappiness of winds, the light
That comes on things we never more shall see.
Yet I am thrilled: thou seemest like the bourne
Of all our music, of the hinting night,
Of souls under the moonlight opening."
Now after speaking, he bowed down his head,
Faltered, and shed wet tears in the vain place.
And Christ half turned, and with grave, open eyes,
Looked on him: but behind there was a sound
Of vast impatience, and the murmurous chafe
Of captains sick for war; and poets shone
All dreaming bright, and fiery prophets, seized
With gladness, boded splendid things; and scarred
Heroes, as desperate men, that see no path,
Yet follow a riddled memorable flag,
Pressed close upon that leader world-engraved,
But he began to pace with slower step,
With wandering gaze, still hesitating more;
Then stayed, and on his last foot strongly leaned.

Faintly the air bore to him blood he knew
His gentle eyes hither and thither roved.
The Furies rose ejaculating fast,
And circled nearer o'er the limitless dead,
Who paused, all whispering: before them hung
Still unredeemed Prometheus from his crag;

His limbs impaled: then stood the Son of Man,
And seemed almost about to speak; the dead
In silence upward gazed. The Titan's face
Through passing storms leaps out in dazzling pain
Momently on them, and his tone returns
Fitfully through the gusting hurricane.
"Stay, mighty dreamer, though thou comest on
Attracting all the dead, to thy deep charm
Resigned and bright; yet stay, and look on me!
Do I not trouble thee? Dost thou not swerve
Smelling my kindred blood on the great track?
Full in thy path I menace. After me
Canst thou go on?" The storm carried his voice
From them, and veiled with rushing hail his face.
Then many unbound heroes toward him ran,
Going with great dumb gestures between him
And Christ; and in their leader's face looked up
Beseeching him their brother to release;
Then they refrained, all motionless: and now
The Titan bowed, coming upon them, and seemed
Falling to carry with him all the crag
Down on them: over the dead host he cried:
"Lo all these ancient prisoners released!
Did I not feel them everywhere come down
Easily from immortal torment? yet
I, I alone, while all came down from woe,
Still striving, could not wrench away these limbs.
O Christ, canst thou a nail move from these feet,
Thou who art standing in such love of me?

Thy hands are too like mine to undo these bonds,
Brother, although the dead world follow thee,
Deep-fascinated: love hath marred us both,
And one yearning, as wide as is the world.
O how thy power leaves thee at this cross!
Prepare thee for the anguish! Thou shalt know
Trouble so exquisite, that from his wheel
Happy Ixion shall spare tears for thee;
And thou shalt envy me my shadowy crag
And softly-feeding vulture. Thou shalt stand
Gazing for ever on the earth, and watch
How fast thy words incarnadine the world!
That I know all things is my torment; nothing,
That ever shall befall, to me is new:
Already I have suffered it far-off;
And on the mind the poor event appears
The pale reflexion of some ancient pang.
Yet I foresee dim comfort, and discern
A bleak magnificence of endless hope.
It seems that even thy woe shall have an end.
It comes upon thee! O prepare thee; ah,
That wailing, those young cries, this smouldering
smell!
I see the dreadful look of men unborn.
What hast thou said, that all the air blood?"

He cried with nostril shuddering fast; and Christ
Moved to unbind him; but with arm outstretched
Suddenly stood. A scene unrolling stayed
Him who had easily released the dead,

He knew that for a time the great advance
He must delay, postponing our desire.
The earth again he sees, and all mankind
Half in the shining sun upright, and half
Reposing in the shadow ; deserts and towns,
And cloudy mountains and the trembling sea,
And all the deeds done ; and the spoken words
Distinct he hears : the human history
Before his eyes defiles in bright sunbeams,
An endless host parading past ; whom he,
Their leader mild, remorsefully reviewed,
And had no joy in them, although aloud
They cried his name, and with fierce faces glad
Looked up to him for praise, all murmuring proud,
And bloody trophies toward him flourished and
waved :
But as he stood, gazing, from time to time
He seemed to swerve, as though his hand grew
red,
Or move, as though to interrupt some sight.

Now when the dead saw that he must not stir,
Absorbed, with wonder gathering in his eyes,
They came about him, touching him, and some
Reminded him, and looked into his face.
Others in patience laid them down, or fell
To calling him sweet earthly names : at last
Waiting the signal that he could not give,
Wanting the one word that he might not speak,
Seeing he stirred not once, they wandered off,

And gathering into groups, yet spoke of him ;
Then to despair slowly dispersed, as men
Return with morning to the accustomed task.
And as without some theatre, so friend
Waited for friend, and speaking of that scene,
Into the ancient sorrow walked away.
Yet many could not, after such a sight,
At once retire, but must from time to time
Linger with undetermining bright eyes.
Now at each parting way some said farewell,
And each man took his penance up, perhaps
Less easily from such an interval :
The vault closed back, woe upon woe, the wheel
Revolved, the stone rebounded ; for that time
Hades her interrupted life resumed.

THE APPARITION

I

My dead Love came to me, and said:
"God gives me one hour's rest,
To spend upon the earth with thee:
How shall we spend it best?"

"Why as of old," I said, and so
We quarrelled as of old.
But when I turned to make my peace,
That one short hour was told.

II

Nine nights she did not come to me:
The heaven was filled with rain;
And as it fell, and fell, I said,
"She will not come again."

Last night she came, not as before,
But in a strange attire;
Weary she seemed, and very faint,
As though she came from fire.

III

She is not happy! It was noon;
The sun fell on my head:
And it was not an hour in which
We think upon the dead.

She is not happy! I should know
Her voice, much more her cry;
And close beside me a great rose
Had just begun to die.

She is not happy! As I walked,
Of her I was aware:
She cried out, like a creature hurt,
Close by me in the air.

IV

UNDER the trembling summer stars,
I turned from side to side;
When she came in and sat with me,
As though she had not died.

And she was kind to me and sweet,
She had her ancient way;
Remembered how I liked her hand
Amid my hair to stray.

She had forgotten nothing, yet
Older she seemed, and still:
All quietly she took my kiss,
Even as a mother will.

She rose, and in the streak of dawn
She turned as if to go:
But then again came back to me;
My eyes implored her so!

She pushed the hair from off my brow,
And looked into my eyes.
"I live in calm," she said, "and there
Am learning to be wise."

"Why grievest thou? I pity thee
Still turning on this bed."
"And art thou happy?" I exclaimed.
"Alas!" she sighed, and fled.

V

I WOKE : she had been standing by,
With wonder on her face.
She came toward me, very bright,
As from a blessed place.

She touched me not, but smiling spoke,
And softly as before.
"They gave me drink from some slow stream ;
I love thee now no more."

VI

THE other night she hurried in,
Her face was wild with fear :
"Old friend," she said, "I am pursued,
May I take refuge here ?"

LYRICS

I

O to recall !
What to recall ?
All the roses under snow ?
  Not these.
Stars that toward the water go ?
  Not these.

O to recall !
What to recall ?
All the greenness after rain ?
  Not this.
Joy that gleameth after pain ?
  Not this.

O to recall !
What to recall ?
Not the greenness nor delight,
  Not these ;
Not the roses out of sight,
  Not these.

O to recall !
What to recall ?
Not the star in waters red,
  Not this :
Laughter of a girl that's dead,
  O this !

II

I IN the greyness rose ;
I could not sleep for thinking of one dead.
Then to the chest I went,
Where lie the things of my beloved spread.

Quietly these I took ;
A little glove, a sheet of music torn,
Paintings, ill-done perhaps ;
Then lifted up a dress that she had worn.

And now I came to where
Her letters are ; they lie beneath the rest ;
And read them in the haze ;
She spoke of many things, was sore opprest.

But these things moved me not ;
Not when she spoke of being parted quite,
Or being misunderstood,
Or growing weary of the world's great fight.

Not even when she wrote
Of our dead child, and the hand-writing swerved ;
Not even then I shook :
Not even by such words was I unnerved.

I thought, she is at peace ;
Whither the child is gone, she too has passed.
And a much needed rest
Is fallen upon her, she is still at last.

But when at length I took
From under all those letters one small sheet,
Folded and writ in haste ;
Why did my heart with sudden sharpness beat ?

Alas, it was not sad !
Her saddest words I had read calmly o'er.
Alas, it had no pain !
Her painful words, all these I knew before.

A hurried happy line !
A little jest, too slight for one so dead :
This did I not endure :
Then with a shuddering heart no more I read.

III

O THOU art put to many uses, sweet!
Thy blood will urge the rose, and surge in Spring;
But yet! . . .

And all the blue of thee will go to the sky,
And all thy laughter to the rivers run;
But yet! . . .

Thy tumbling hair will in the West be seen,
And all thy trembling bosom in the dawn;
But yet! . . .

Thy briefness in the dewdrop shall be hung,
And all the frailness of thee on the foam;
But yet! . . .

Thy soul shall be upon the moonlight spent,
Thy mystery spread upon the evening mere.
And yet! . . .

AN HOUR

NEVER can God together put
That slight and sunny hour ;
More serious things are in His sweep,
But this beyond His power.

Never the sunbeam quite as then,
Never the way it came !
Never thy head in just the place,
Never thy hand the same !

The sunbeam was not over-bright,
It came a wonted way,
Thy head had no uncommon droop ;
Thy words were light and gay.

Yet dreadful is that sunlight now,
Awful that droop of head.
For they are sacred sudden things,
And dear as are the dead.

A FEAR

O Love, the earth is very old,
And very vast the sky;
I fear for thee, now thou art dead,
To lose thee utterly.

O Love, I tremble when the heaven
Sparkles, and rushes back;
I fear thy little human face
Eternally to lack.

O Love, in such a sight thou art
So small a thing to save;
And listen! how between us sweeps
The roaring trackless grave!

A DREAM

I had a dream of her last night;
It seemed I was in Hell;
A listless river past me went,
Of which old poets tell.

And as I watched the slipping stream,
A tress of woman's hair
Was drifted on the languid wave,
And it was golden fair.

IF IT MIGHT BE !

If it might be !
If once again,
The gush of sunlight and the pain,
If it might be !

If it might be,
I would forego
This twilight settling on me slow,
If it might be !

If it might be,
They would not please,
These quiet fields and heavy trees,
If it might be !

If it might be !
I would not pine
With wheeling birds and dozing kine,
If it might be !

If it might be !
How fast they tire
The level land and peaceful spire !
If it might be !

If it might be !
O sudden sheen,
The rapture, and the dripping green !
If it might be !

MOTHER AND CHILD

My little babe, why dost thou wail
To feel the air?
Doth all the brightness make thee pale?
Art thou aware
Of heavy sighings in the Sun,
Thou that hast not learned to run?
Look up high, never cry,
Kiss me, kiss me!

Who hath warned thee in the womb?
Thou seem'st to know;
Or told thee stories in the gloom
Of old sorrow?
Wilt thou drink then of my breast?
Ah, in me there is no rest.
Look up high, never cry,
Kiss me, kiss me!

Must thou drink? Too much of me,
Pretty boy,
Thou takest in so eagerly,
Too much for joy.
O then gently! Why so fast
But of me to drink at last?
Look up high, never cry,
Kiss me, kiss me!

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NUMBER III